

Volume 4, Issue 3, July 2000

Seven Reasons to Study the Classics

Oliver DeMille

"It is chiefly through books that we enjoy intercourse with superior minds . . . In the best books, great men talk to us, give us their most precious thoughts, and pour their souls into ours."

-William Ellery Channing

"How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book."

-Henry David Thoreau

"When you reread a classic you do not see more in the book than you did before; you see more in you than was there before."

-Clifton Fadiman

National Books

Please take out a blank sheet of paper. Now answer each of the following questions:

1. What books are your companions through life?
2. If you were evacuated to another planet and could only take one book, upon which to base the whole teaching of your family and establishing right and wrong for your community, what would it be?
3. What is good? What is evil?

Thank you. I'll refer to these later, so please stop reading and answer these three questions in writing before continuing.

In 1987, the bicentennial of the Constitutional Convention, three very important bestsellers swept America: Robert Bork's *The Tempting of America*, E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, and *The Closing of the American Mind* by Allan Bloom. They presented essentially the same message, about law, society, and education respectively: that we have strayed from our founding-and not in a good direction. In fact, together they are a sort of update to Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

Consider Allan Bloom's profound analysis of American education. As I read this modern classic, three major points stood out. First, societies are successful when people choose to be good. If people choose mediocrity, they end up with a mediocre society. If they choose excellence, they build an excellent society; if they choose decadence, society decays. This is not only common sense, it is historically accurate.

Second, people choose to be good when they are taught and believe in good. People's choices are a direct result of their beliefs. And their beliefs are profoundly influenced by what they are taught by parents, friends, teachers, clergy, etc. If they are taught a

falsehood or even evil, and if they believe it, they will choose poorly. Teaching influences belief, which guides action.

Third, the thing which determines how well they are taught is their national books. A national book is something that almost everyone in the nation accepts as a central truth. The national book of the Jews is the Torah; Muslims, the Koran; Christians, the Bible; etc. It could be argued that Shakespeare is a national author for England, Goethe and Luther for Germany, Dante and Machiavelli for Italy, Tolstoy in Russia, and so on. Whatever the nation, its national books, the books almost everyone in the nation revere and believe in, will determine the culture. Good national books, like the Bible or Shakespeare's works, will lead to a good nation. Bad national books like *The Communist Manifesto* or *Mein Kampf* will lead to bad nations until they reject such books.

Now, what of a nation with no national book, with no central text which almost everyone agrees upon as the measuring rod of right and wrong? Such a nation is simply without culture, or at best it is in the process of losing it.

America's National Books

This leads to the question, "What is America's national book?" Bloom argues that when he was teaching college at the University of Chicago in the 1950s and 60s, he could tell what the national books were by asking students what books formed the core of their lives, the basis of society. The two answers he always got were the Bible and the Declaration of Independence. In the late 1960s this changed: Bloom's students really couldn't answer his question. They stopped referring to the Bible and the Declaration, and they listed . . . nothing. No national books. The Bible and the Declaration remained for the older generations, but the youngsters came up with no core source of absolutes, no central fountain of truth.

In the 1980s it changed again: students began listing various rock n' roll music tapes as the thing they revered and turned to for truth and answers. Practically every college student knew this new fountain of truth, studied it daily and for long hours, and felt passionately about it. If you doubt it, Bloom suggested, try to tell a group of youth why their music is bad and they will respond with the same energy and even anger as if you had tried to tell a group 100 years ago that the Bible was bad.

This obviously has some very negative ramifications for America's future, but even rock music isn't truly a national book because it is only shared by the younger generations.

In fact, there is no true national book in America today. No national books means no culture; and this is very ominous for the future. Any society which loses its national book declines and collapses in ignorance, dwindles and perishes in unbelief. In Bloom's own words: "The loss of the gripping inner life vouchsafed those who were nurtured by the Bible must be primarily attributed not to our schools or political life, but to the family, which, with all its rights to privacy, has proved unable to maintain any content of its ownThe delicate fabric of the civilization into which the successive generations are woven has unraveled, and children are raised, not educated"

"People sup together, play together, travel together, but they do not think together. Hardly any homes have any intellectual life whatsoever, let alone one that informs the vital interests of life. Educational TV marks the high tide for family intellectual life.

"The cause of this decay of the family's traditional role as the transmitter of tradition is the same as that of the decay of the humanities: nobody believes that the old books do, or even could, contain the truth In the United States, practically speaking, the Bible was the only common culture, one that united simple and sophisticated, rich and poor, young and old, and . . . provided access to the seriousness of books. With its gradual and inevitable disappearance, the very idea of such a total book and the possibility and necessity of world-explanation is disappearing. And fathers and mothers have lost the idea that the highest aspiration they might have for their children is for them to be wise-as priests, prophets or philosophers are wise. Specialized competence and success are all that they can imagine."1

Bloom is not only correct about the failure of the American family to fulfill its role as the primary center of education; his analysis of the modern famine of classics as the source of education is equally important: "My grandparents were ignorant people by our standards, and my grandfather held only lowly jobs. But their home was spiritually rich because all the things done in it, not only what was specifically ritual, found their origin in the Bible's commandments, and their explanation in the Bible's stories and the commentaries on them, and had their imaginative counterparts in the seeds of the myriad of exemplary heroes. My grandparents found reasons for the existence of their family and the fulfillment of their duties in serious writings, and they interpreted their special sufferings with respect to a great and ennobling past. Their simple faith and practices linked them to great scholars and thinkers who dealt with the same material There was a respect for real learning, because it had a felt connection with their lives. This is what a community and a history mean, a common experience inviting high and low into a single body of belief

"Without the great revelations, epics and philosophies as part of our natural vision, there is nothing to see out there, and eventually little left inside. The Bible is not the only means to furnish a mind, but without a book of similar gravity, read with the gravity of the potential believer, it will remain unfurnished."2

If Bloom is correct, and I think he is, then America cannot remain free, prosperous or moral unless the overall culture adopts a central text of the caliber of the Bible. This is not only profound, but it is actually a marching order for parents and educators. The whole problem is a result of families failing to teach, educate, train and civilize.

Study the Classics

This is the first reason for studying the classics: We need a national book to maintain our morality and civilization; and a nation that doesn't regularly read good books, think about important ideas, or consider the big picture, is not capable of adopting or following a national book. National books must be carefully studied, pondered, discussed and talked about by a large portion of the population, or they lose their value and impact. We must read the classics, and families must lead out, or we will cease to be the kind of nation that deserves success, prosperity, civilization or happiness.

This may seem too dramatic, but the reality is that Greece, Rome, Egypt, Israel and other great civilizations in history fell the same way, following a similar pattern. We may think we are above that; so did they all. We are not above it; nobody ever was nor ever will be; that is the message of the Bible, and it is only in a post-Bible America that we think

otherwise. Our freedoms can be lost, and it is only in a post-Declaration of Independence America that we doubt it.

In addition to maintaining our freedom and our civilization, there are at least six other reasons to study the classics:

1. The Classics Teach us Human Nature

A knowledge of human nature is the key to leadership. There are four basic instincts which all humans have:

- A. Survival and security.
- B. Social mobility, power, relationships.
- C. Adventure, excitement.
- D. To gain meaning, to know self, truth and God.

The classics give us a glimpse into each of these basic human instincts. In fact, the thing which makes a classic great is glaring insight into basic human nature. Ultimately, as you study the classics, you learn about your own personal nature. Learning through experience is good, but it is often better to learn from someone else's experiences and build on them- we hope a baby will learn from his parents not to touch a hot stove, even though the actual experience would certainly have impact. If we will let them, the classics can teach us lessons without the pain of repeating certain mistakes ourselves. They can show us correct choices which will get us where we want to go.

We will certainly get our own share of challenging experiences, but learning from others can help us immeasurably on our journey. Classics allow us to experience, in an intimate way, the greatest mistakes and successful choices of human history. If we learn from these mistakes and successes, we will make fewer mistakes and have more successes.

And at a deeper level, knowing how others think, feel and act allows us to predict behavior and lead accordingly. We can develop empathy, compassion, wisdom and self-discipline without subjecting our relationships to the learning curve. This is invaluable to the spouse, parent, entrepreneur, community leader or statesman. People with experience have been through certain patterns many times and know what to anticipate. The classics can provide us with many such experiences.

2. The Classics Bring us Face-to-Face with Greatness

The purpose of studying literature is to *become* better. First, as we read we experience despair, heartache, tragedy-and we learn to recognize what causes them and avoid it in our own lives. As we study the characters, real or fictional, in the classics, we are inspired by greatness, which is the first step to becoming great ourselves. In the classics we come face-to-face with Moses on Sinai, Buddha leaving the castle, Christ at Gethsemane, Mohammed's cave (and Plato's), Paul on Mars Hill, Adam's finger outstretched on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Washington at Valley Forge, Hamlet, Lear, Shylock, Othello, Macbeth, MacDuff, Hector, Penelope and Jane Eyre. *Who we are* changes as we set higher and higher standards of what life is about and what we are here to accomplish.

3. The Classics Take us to the Frontier to be Conquered

All generations before this one have had geographical frontiers to conquer. We don't. And without a frontier we cannot become what the founders, the explorers and the

pioneers became in their extremities. Our challenges define us, our reactions to them mold and shape us. As Thucydides said over three thousand years ago, and as I like to tell my students at George Wythe College: "There is no need to suppose that human beings differ very much one from another: but it is true that the ones who come out on top are the ones who have been trained in the hardest school."³

Human beings need a frontier in order to progress. Fortunately, we do have one frontier left, and it is in fact the hardest one. It is the frontier within. In all of history, this frontier has not been fully conquered. The most challenging struggles of life are internal-and the classics can help.

The classics deal with the real questions of life, our deepest concerns: joy, pain, fear, love, hate, courage, anger, death, faith. These issues are reality; they are eternal and more lasting than jobs, careers, school, material things.

In the classics we can often experience other people's characters more powerfully than in real life because the author lets us see their thoughts, feelings and reasons for and consequences of their choices (which we hardly ever see in others, and often not even in ourselves). Our goal in life is to become truly good, really happy. The classics help us see that quest in others and how their choices fail or succeed. A by-product of this rapport is the erasure of prejudices and ill-founded biases that divide and factionalize us from others. Classics help us connect with individuals whatever their race, creed, age, culture and even place in history.

I fear that modernity has come to mean ignoring what is important because we are too busy with what is immediate.⁴ Nietzsche said that the difference between modern and ancient times is that modern man substitutes the morning newspaper for morning prayer. Bloom adds that now we have replaced the newspaper with the television. Too often we focus on the mortal rather than the eternal: this is a disease of modern times.

The classics are a remedy and can be a cure. They force us to turn off the TV and computer, to quietly study for hours and hours and hours-reading, pondering, thinking, asking, crying, laughing, struggling, and above all, feeling, changing, becoming. And then, because we are better, we must go out and serve.

4. The Classics Force us to Think

First we are caused to think about the characters in the story, then about ourselves, then about people we know and finally about humanity in general. At first reading the classics can be a chore, an assignment. If we persist, it eventually becomes entertainment. Then one day (after a few weeks for some, perhaps years for another) something clicks; all the exposure to greatness reaches critical mass. And you, the reader, awaken. Your exposure to greatness changes you: Your ideas are bigger, your dreams wilder, your plans more challenging, your faith more powerful.

The classics can be hard work, and that is exactly what is needed to learn to think. Thinking is hard; deep thinking is not entertaining or easy. Thinking is like exercise, it requires consistency and rigor. Like barbells in a weightlifting room, the classics force us to either put them down or exert our minds. They require us to *think*. And not just in a rote memory way, either. The classics make us struggle, search, ponder, seek, analyze, discover, decide, and reconsider. And, as with physical exercise, the exertion leads to

pleasing results as we metamorphose and experience the pleasure of doing something wholesome and difficult that changes us for the better.

5. The Classics Connect Us to Those Who Share the Stories

Each culture is different because it has different shared stories. Different stories define each family, each religion, each nation. And members of each connect *themselves* with the stories—they make the stories part of their personal story.

Can you imagine the Jews without the stories of Moses, the Maccabees, or the Holocaust? Or Americans without stories of Paul Revere, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln? Learn the stories of a culture, and you will come to understand that culture. That is why I think it is such a tragedy that the current generation of American youth are mostly growing up without the stories of the Declaration of Independence, Daniel in the Lion's Den, Patrick Henry or Sitting Bull or Daniel Webster. The classics are the ark, the preserver, of stories which unite the cultures and the generations.

In addition to cultural, national and family stories, we each have individual stories. We all have a personal canon, a set of stories which we hang on to and believe in and base our lives around; and great classics are the best canon. A canon is the set of books we consider to be the standard of truth. Since the purpose of reading, of gaining education, is to become good, our most important task is to choose the right books. Our personal set of stories, our canon, shapes our lives. I believe it is a law of the universe that we will not rise above our canon. Our canon is part of us, deeply, subconsciously. And the characters and teachings in our canon shape our characters—good, evil, mediocre, or great.

6. Our Canon Becomes our Plot

There are four types of stories: bent, broken, whole, and healing.⁵

A. Bent stories portray evil as good, and good as evil. Such stories are meant to enhance the evil tendencies of the reader, such as pornography and many horror books and movies. The best decision regarding Bent stories is to avoid them like the plague.

B. Broken stories portray evil as evil and good as good, but evil wins. Something is broken, not right, in need of fixing. Such books are not uplifting, but can be very inspiring. Broken stories can be very good for the reader if they motivate him or her to heal them, to fix them. *The Communist Manifesto* is a broken classic; so are *The Lord of the Flies* and *1984*. In each of these, evil wins; but they have been very motivating to me because I have felt a real need to help reverse their messages in the real world.

C. Whole stories are where good is good and good wins. Most of the classics are in this category, and readers should spend most of their time in such works.

D. Healing stories can be either Whole or Broken stories where the reader is profoundly moved, changed, significantly improved by his reading experience.

I recommend three rules in coming face-to-face with greatness through the classics:

Avoid Bent stories.

Develop a personal canon of Healing stories.

Spend the majority of your studies in Whole works, but don't neglect Broken stories that you ought to be fixing.

Your National Book

Now, refer to the answers you wrote at the beginning of the chapter. Look at question number two: "If you were evacuated to another planet and could only take one book, upon which to base the whole teaching of your family and establishing right and wrong for your community, what would it be?"

Your answer is a good indication of what your national book might be.

Look at the other two answers you gave. Are your companion books through life in line with your national book? What about your definitions of good and evil? Look at your life; is it in keeping with your canon?

All of this can be very powerful as you analyze where to take the education of your children, your students, yourself.

Perhaps the most important thing America can do to remain free and prosperous is to clarify a national book and live by it. From the Founding through the end of World War II, the Bible and the Declaration were our national books. Even the great revolutions which occurred after 1945, such as increased freedom for Blacks and Indians, were fueled by those two national books. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speeches center around them and quote them extensively. America was based on them and became what it did because of them. Take them away, and America will become something very, very different.

The place to start is with yourself: Establish a clear canon, and spend time in it every day. Become an expert on it, ponder it, put your life in line with it. Teach it to your family; then others. If you are a teacher, take it into your classroom. If your faith doesn't include the Bible, use the Declaration or something of equal magnitude. And then broaden your knowledge to the other classics which support that central classic. America is what it is due to its national books, and the choices you make now regarding books will have tremendous impact on what America is twenty and fifty years from now.